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LMDA New & Noteworthy, volume 2, no. 3

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LMDA NEW & NOTEWORTHY

December 2016

Issue 2.3

A Note from the President



This week I witnessed *Notes from the Field*, Anna Deavere Smith's newest work that depicts the impact of America's school-to-prison pipeline. I cried, several times, as did many others around me. I was moved not only by these true stories, but also by the simple, theatrical way Smith embodies specific characters of diverse backgrounds and perspectives to say something universal about human existence. I thought about the "required reading" I had to do in school and wished theatre like this could be "required experiencing" as part of our education in empathy.

Wishing you a joyful and restful holiday season. We have work to do in 2017.

Ken Cerniglia

dramaturgy/publication I MELISSA HILLMAN

(PART 1 OF 2)

Melissa Hillman, creator of the blog [Bitter Gertrude](#), talks about how her experiences as the Artistic Director for Impact Theatre in Berkeley fueled her to create an online platform to address issues of theatre and culture.



Why did you start the Bitter Gertrude blog?

I've always been a writer. I'd published a few articles before the blog. I'd long considered a blog, but I wasn't sure what direction I'd take. After running my theatre company, Impact Theatre, for so many years, it had become clear to me that the lines of communication between theatre admin and playwrights, actors, techs, and audience were startlingly opaque. I'd written a piece about audition advice for Theatre Bay Area Magazine that was surprisingly popular. I received a pile of thank you notes for its blunt honesty. And I knew that there was a gap there I could fill.

How did the blog grow to address issues of social justice in the theatre industry?

It took a very short time for me to tie the blog to my commitment to social justice. Diversity and equity are issues of huge importance to me. I was already writing about social justice concerns in our industry elsewhere, so it was a natural fit. From there, I expanded to cultural criticism and political topics outside theatre as well. Two of the most widely read pieces I've ever written in my career were Bitter Gertrude posts about topics outside of theatre—one was about [Beyoncé](#) and one was about [sexism in the primaries](#). The hate mail was pretty astonishing for both. Harassment and abuse are depressingly common for women writers on the internet. The very best advice I got early on was to change my settings so I would have to manually approve—or not—each comment. I haven't written about harassment. It's been widely covered by other writers, most notably by [Lindy West](#).

How do your skills as a dramaturg serve your blog writing?

My dramaturgical skills compel me to source deeply. Most of my articles are littered with links to back up what I'm saying. Sometimes the academic writer pushes herself too far forward, and the dramaturg has to step in and say, "OK, this is boring," or "This is parenthetical." Academic writing is a different animal. Cutting to the narrative has been a struggle. I'm not entirely successful. But the dramaturg in me is working hard to keep my posts from becoming lengthy academic screeds.

(continued in our January 2017 issue)

Interview by Megan McClain

Kelly discusses her work in television and theater, and her thoughts on how TV's embrace of playwrights is impacting our industry and culture.

What Kelly is working on:

I am six months into a new job as a manager at The Shuman Company in Culver City, where I'm representing writers and helping playwrights cross over into TV and film.

I'm also a co-founder of The Kilroys; in my free time, I work as an activist and an advocate for gender parity in the theater. I'm on the board of the WP Theater in New York and I recently commissioned and produced an evening of short plays in LA, called Hillanthropy--a one-night benefit for Hillary Clinton's campaign, inspired by writer Matt Schatz.

I'm also a developmental producer and a freelance dramaturg; I have a small company called Creative Destruction, and I occasionally produce workshops and readings. I spent some time in residency this past year at Merrimack Rep and at Liz Engelman's Tofte Lake Center in Minnesota, as well as SPACE on Ryder Farm with Mona Mansour. I also worked with Jean Bruce Scott and Mary Kathryn Nagle at Native Voices at the Autry.

On the dramaturgical work involved in being a manager:

The writer-manager relationship is a very intimate and developmental one, and it's often similar to the new play dramaturgy process. Every manager's individual process and relationship with a writer is different, but I often read multiple drafts of a treatment or script, then give notes and help a writer polish it prior to submission.

There are a lot of similarities between the work I'm doing now and the work I did as a literary director/dramaturg. I'm constantly reading scripts and talking to writers and agents about new plays and the future arc of a writer's career. My advocacy for writers continues, as a big part of this job is continually meeting TV and film executives to build relationships, then connecting them with writers to yield future work. I'm working to create space in TV/film for playwrights to crossover, building on years of their cumulative dramatic craft. It's



an exciting new challenge for me to think of a writer's work in terms of "fit." Where are they meant to work in the TV ecology and with whom?

How her experience in non-profit theater informs/inspires her work in TV management:

South Coast Repertory [where I previously worked as Literary Director] operates from a model of financial abundance, committed historically to commissioning more writers than they could produce for the betterment of the field. But as I continued to work in non-profit theater, I noticed a pervasive "scarcity mentality" in most of the industry, that resources for artists were scarce -- development, workshop and production opportunities. Inspired by SCR's longtime commitment to supporting the next generation of playwrights, I'm interested in the idea of abundance and what I can do to create opportunities for playwrights to get paid for their craft and their time in TV and theater.

On the cultural impact of playwrights moving to film and television:

There is a slightly outmoded fear, that people are going to "lose" playwrights to television. I don't believe it's an either/or proposition. I believe it's a "yes, and" proposition. My friend Adam Rapp was once asked how he's so prolific, how he manages to write concurrently for theater, TV and film. He said "I'm a playwright; I write plays because I'm compelled to, because that's who I am. I'll always write plays." The writers I know who are engaging on both sides -- Sheila Callaghan, Bekah Brunstetter, Aurin Squire, Olivia Dufault (and many others) -- people for whom playwriting is a priority, they carve out time to do that work.

As far as how TV structure may be affecting playwriting, I believe that it's an older question. The advent of MTV back in the early '80s, the advent of cable, and also video-game narrative and multi-protagonist narrative, are all affecting dramatic storytelling. They are complicating the traditional protagonist/antagonist model. We consume and create complicated, fast narratives because we've been doing it for decades.

On finding the right balance of projects:

The best work I do, whether it's with new plays or with new TV material, is borne of necessity. It's a story that needs to be told, or I have a relationship with a writer who feels a dire need to get a story across. The mix of projects I'm working on is ever-changing, but it's always driven by writers whose work and experience captures my imagination. I'm drawn to epic worldviews and writers unafraid of revolution--and I tend to respond to things as I'm called. I try to stay present with artists and speak to what drives them the most, because it's my job to reflect and support.

A note from Kelly on generosity: In addition to fostering an atmosphere of abundance, I believe it's important as dramaturgs/producers/thought provocateurs to remain open and generous -- to pay forward the wisdom and mentorship we've received from the myriad writers, artists, and dramaturgs who've come before us. To that end, if you're a dramaturg interested in TV and you'd like to talk more about it, [I'd love to connect](#).

Interview by Jeremy Stoller

Imda happenings | CHARLES HAUGLAND

I WAS AN LMDA BAKE SALE BABY; Or, reasons to love Lessing Week

My first Lessing Week bake sale was while I was an intern at Actors Theatre of Louisville. I can't remember what I made, and all I remember eating was Julie Dubiner's rugelach. They are pretty phenomenal, like you-remember-eating-it-eight-years-later phenomenal. The pastry was flaky, the jam on the sides had caramelized and crackled, and – okay, I'll stop talking about them. Staff members from all over the organization came out, and bought things, or even just gave money. We raised over \$100 that day that we sent off to LMDA.



Every year, dramaturgs across the Americas host informal fundraisers for the organization, right around January 22nd (the birthday of the world's first dramaturg, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing). The proceeds from those bake sales go to fund early-career dramaturgs to attend the national conference, and here's where these silly bake sales really changed the course of my life and career. Because the year following my internship – before anybody ever paid me to do dramaturgy – the organization underwrote my travel through one of those grants, and I attended the 2008 conference in San Diego. That conference solidified dramaturgy for me as a profession; I created professional relationships and friendships with colleagues in the field who I still call for advice; I became a lifelong believer in the power of LMDA to gather the field and create meaningful conversation.

So when I started working at the Huntington later that summer, I knew I'd be baking that winter to help bring more dramaturgs to the conference that year. These fundraisers are by design small, humble, and don't require a lot of start-up capital. Every year I've held one at

the Huntington, I have been able to raise at least \$70, and now colleagues from the development, education, and production departments bake with me.

What I want to emphasize though is how important and transformative for our field bringing early-career dramaturgs to the conference is. For dramaturgs who don't have an organization that can offset any of their costs, attending the conference is a really high bar, and a program like this makes at least a tiny crack in the economic barriers that hold back the diversity of our field. Each year, participants' perspectives enliven discussions and broaden our view of what the next generation of dramaturgs is thinking about. I can't imagine last year's conference in Portland without the 2015 Travel Grant recipients: Jolene Noelle, Fly Steffens, and Gabriella Steinberg.

So please join us for LMDA's 2017 Lessing Week events, including the bake sale – [send me an email](#) and I'll send you all the details! Bake a plate of cookies and sell them at your desk – or rally your organization and make a big old spectacle of it. For those who don't want to bake, you can crochet little figures or write poems for a dollar or do anything else where you can get people to give you money based on some skill you have. As one of the many dramaturgs who have been welcomed into LMDA through this program, I can tell you from experience how much this support can transform a young dramaturg's career path. I'll be thinking about my first conference when I'm icing cupcakes.

Charles Haugland

odds & ends

- To file under miscellaneous + belated: LMDA member Meghan Winch was a contestant on the October 28 episode of Jeopardy! - see photo of her at right with some great buzzer technique. Congrats, Meghan!
- Have you renewed your membership for 2017? You have until January 22!
- Check out our updated roster of regional reps [here](#) -- reach out to yours, say hello, and let them know what sorts of activities you're interested in attending.
- Looking for a job? Don't forget to check the listings at lmda.org/jobs.



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